

The University of Chicago

STATE SUPERVISION OF PUBLIC
LIBRARIES

WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE
ORGANIZATION AND FUNCTIONS OF STATE LIBRARY
EXTENSION AGENCIES

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE LIBRARY
SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DECEMBER, 1941

By
FRITZ VEIT

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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NOTE

The following pages contain the "essential portion" of a doctoral dissertation, which is being published by the U. S. Office of Education. The dissertation forms part of Bulletin, 1940, No. 6, Monograph No. 16, entitled Organization and Functions of State Agencies for Library Service, by Ralph M. Dunbar, Nora E. Beust, Edith A. Lathrop, and Fritz Veit.



STATE SUPERVISION OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

This study explores the administrative supervision exercised by the states in the American federal union over the public library services maintained by the various types of subordinate political units into which the states are divided.

Since administrative supervision must move within the authorization given by the state constitution and state laws, it has been necessary to analyze the laws providing for extension agencies and their services. In addition, the findings have been based on administrative rules and regulations. The most important source of data for the study was the information furnished by the returns to questionnaires submitted to all library extension agencies by the United States Office of Education. The writer spent nearly three months in Washington analyzing and tabulating the data thus collected.

To delimit the scope of the study it was first of all desirable to define the terms control and supervision. The present study defines supervision as all measures of state interest, interference, and participation in local affairs originating with state administrative authorities. If such measures originate with the constitutional assembly, the legislature, and the courts, they are designated as constitutional, legislative, and judicial control respectively.

Following Schuyler C. Wallace's State Administrative Supervision Over Cities in the United States,¹ the devices of adminis-

¹Schuyler C. Wallace, State Administrative Supervision Over Cities in the United States (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), p. 39.

trative supervision were presented in the "ascending order of their individual effectiveness": Reports, Services, Grants-in-Aid, Certification. But, before an analysis of the devices of administrative supervision is undertaken it is logical to describe, classify and evaluate the various types of agencies charged with supervision over libraries, and, as a further preliminary, it is of considerable importance to examine the qualifications, education and training, of the personnel charged with supervision.

Form of Organization

Four main types of state library extension agencies are at present charged with the task of library extension. It was hoped that the analysis of the functions performed by these agencies would help determine the type which is best suited to perform them. Differences have been found to exist between the several forms, but there is rarely an extension function which would be performed by one type only and neglected by all other types. Further, any exact evaluation was made impossible on account of differences in statistical reporting. There are scarcely two agencies which agree fully in their manner of reporting. The statement, however, may be ventured, on the basis of the data at hand, that any of the types of organization employed may serve as an effective vehicle of library extension. Judgment as to which form is the best must be reserved until procedures are devised which permit the isolation and measurement of all factors involved in the management of an agency, such as personnel, resources, and activities.

Both for economic reasons and in order to facilitate control by a central authority, it has been found desirable in other fields of public administration to combine agencies serving iden-

tical or similar functions. It is to be expected that this tendency will grow and will also extend into the field of libraries. If this trend continues, the independent library commissions, in this study designated library extension agencies proper, are likely to be reduced in number, and are likely to be incorporated into a unified agency performing all library functions--an agency known in this study by the generic term state library.

Strong opposition on the part of librarians both on the local and state level, not always supported by evidence, makes it appear unlikely that the recommendations of the surveyors of the whole state governmental machinery will be followed, and that all state library activities will be absorbed by the state department of education. A change in library opinion in this connection is not impossible, but it will be brought about only if librarians can be convinced that the educational administrators primarily concerned with matters of formal education are willing to devote to libraries their due share of professional interest. However important the voice of the librarians may be, changes will in the last analysis be determined by the lawmakers who view the library not as a separate entity but as one of the many concerns of state interest which are brought to their attention.

Government by Boards

The retention of the board form of government has been supported mainly by the argument that lay boards guarantee popular participation in government, prevent a single man from exercising dictatorial powers, and are less likely to be influenced by political considerations than state departments. Principal liabilities of the board form of government are slowness of action and the danger of board interference with the routine of adminis-

tration. It is evident from the fact that the board cuts across all forms of state library extension agencies that on the state level, as on the local level, popular participation in library affairs is generally considered desirable. Few boards of state library extension agencies have been known to misuse their power by interfering with the details of library management. In most instances reported, board members have been instrumental in the popularization of the library idea throughout the state, and have not only fought for the support of the agency to which they are attached but for libraries in general.

In spite of theoretical considerations which might be used as arguments against the retention of boards, their further existence seems, on the whole, to work to the advantage of the agency. Boards need not necessarily be preserved as they exist today. It is, indeed, recommended that the boards should reflect the composition of the population at large to a higher degree than they now do. If the agency desires to serve all groups of the population, it should establish through its board membership lines of communication leading to all population groups, and not only to those which have attained a high level of social or educational standing.

Advisory boards, such as may be found today in New York and in Illinois, are worthy of special note. Advisory boards could be maintained even in states in which the general state governmental structure would not permit the continued existence of governing boards.

Resources and Personnel

The paramount role of appropriations in the attainment of the agencies' objectives has been repeatedly stressed. Practi-

cally all of the agencies reported, as one of their main difficulties, the lack of a sufficiently large appropriation. This demand for increased revenues seems fully justified if one expects the agencies to fulfill all the tasks which, by law and by practice, are assigned to them. An increase in the appropriation would above all affect the staff since the personnel expenditures represent about 60 per cent of the total appropriations. It is suggested that such an increase in funds for personnel expenditures should not be exclusively used for additions to the staff, but also for the employment of staff members who are superior in training and experience to many of those now on the agencies' payrolls. If the state library extension agency wishes to supervise the librarians in the state, its staff members should not only be as well qualified as are those librarians, but they should out-rank them as to general education, professional training, and variety of experience--a claim which could not be maintained today. An increase in funds would, of course, permit the rendering of services on an enlarged scale and the intensification of services already offered.

Supervision by State Library Extension Agencies

Of the functions performed by the agencies, those of a supervisory character have been given special attention in this study. It will be recalled that the term supervision, as used in this study, includes all measures designed by the state to improve the subordinate units by persuasion, by aid, by coercion, or by any other means. The functions of the agencies were examined in the light of these supervisory devices. As will be recalled, the presentation of these devices followed the "ascending order of

their individual effectiveness."²

Reports and statistics.--A knowledge of existing conditions should be the basis of any administrative action. The requirement of annual reports is designed to furnish such a basis. There is a wide variation among the agencies both in the practice of collecting reports from local units and in the manner of presenting the agencies' reports. This variation, of course, may not be serious within a single state. In fact, in the statement of objectives and difficulties, lack of comparable data was never a reason for complaint, and only once was the complete lack of statistics noted as a major difficulty encountered in carrying out an agency's objectives. If the movement toward interstate library co-operation is to gain momentum, the need for uniform statistical reporting will become more apparent. State agencies will then want to compare their efforts and their performances with those of others, and this will be possible only if a generally accepted terminology and reporting procedure is observed. It is also evident that a comparative study, such as the present one, could arrive at more generally useful conclusions if it could be built on a foundation of uniform data.

Services.--Including, as it does, the mere giving of advice as well as all other services performed in behalf of subordinate units, the term "services" embraces a large number of activities. Nearly every state authorizes the agency by statute to advise and assist subordinate units. An analysis of the laws reveals that all of them may be traced to a few original statutes. This fact proves that even if there is no national authority which enforces uniform state action, voluntary acceptance by other states

² Ibid.

of a pattern offered by one state assures a considerable degree of agreement among state library laws.

The practices analyzed, likewise, reveal that the advisory and other services are offered by all types of agencies, irrespective of form of government of the agency, and irrespective of the wording of the law by which the rendering of such services was recommended to the agencies or required of them. By advising the libraries in the country about ways in which they can improve their services, and by supplementing local book services, the agencies hope, of course, to attain the most frequently cited objective--that of bringing library service within the reach of every citizen.

In rendering these services, state library extension agencies, however, have not, as a rule, made attempts towards performing another objective which is aimed at the creation of larger units. They loan books to the smallest unit which may require such aid, and they help keep alive units which otherwise would not continue to exist. It is worthy to consider whether such aid should be given indiscriminately, or whether local units could not more frequently be advised to combine in order to form a larger unit.

Grants-in-aid.--Grants-in-aid are recognized as the strongest device in attaining the agencies' objectives. These grants often result in the imposition of various conditions on the libraries accepting such aid. Experience has shown that a library rarely refuses to accept a grant. It goes without saying that grants representing a small percentage of the local appropriation can more easily be refused than grants representing a larger share. The recent grants-in-aid have quite definitely aided the objective of the state library extension agency leading away from the small

units of service toward county and regional units. Old and new forms of state grants alike have given the state library extension agencies a voice in book selection; they have made it possible to maintain library centers at places where the need was most strongly felt; and some attempts may be noticed to control the personnel policy of the libraries by means of state aid. From the statement of the objectives, it is apparent that only a relatively small number of chiefs of agencies have recognized these potentialities of state aid.

It must be emphasized again that the allotments for state grants must be considerably increased beyond the present average, which amounts to less than 3 per cent of the total library income or expenditures in the states as a whole, if an equal opportunity of obtaining library materials for all people in the state is to be provided. If an equal chance on a national scale is the goal, federal aid would be required.

Certification.--It has been shown that more than a fourth of the agencies consider it a major objective to work towards improvement of library personnel standards. Librarianship can obtain general recognition as a profession and, if recognized, attain the same esteem as other professions, only if its members measure up to a corresponding level of general and professional education. However, the library agencies should be aware of the shortcomings as well as of the advantages of certification as a device to attain this end. A combination of certification with a modern scheme of civil service assures to a higher degree the appointment of the right person to the right place than certification applied alone. Although a state is entitled to require compliance with personnel standards of any library, in accordance with present practice, small libraries should not be required to

comply with such standards. If exceptions are not made, the continued existence of many libraries with low incomes would certainly be impossible. To make their closing imperative on account of personnel requirements would not be wise as long as a state does not simultaneously provide library service through a system of larger units.

Preliminaries and Bases of Supervision

The collecting of statistics has already been noted as the first step in administrative supervision. It is evident that surveys which weave the raw data into an organized whole are much more likely to present a clear picture than a large number of uninterpreted reports. Although the making of surveys was expressed only once as a major objective, it has become much more popular in the last decade than in the preceding years. The example set by the State-Wide Library Projects of the Work Projects Administration through its policy of establishing library service only after the territory has been surveyed deserves consideration.

A necessary antecedent and corollary to supervision is the establishing of standards. In the absence of standards, performance of libraries throughout the state cannot be measured by the same norms; to say the least, it is therefore hazardous to make comparative statistics of performance. Only few examples of states applying standards can be cited; most notable are the well-known New York standards.

Co-operation with professional and civic groups.--Such co-operation is freely and frequently practiced. More than a third of the agencies reporting name co-operation with professional and civic groups as one of their major objectives. It is noteworthy that the state library extension agencies proper list this objec-

tive much more frequently than do state libraries. State library extension agencies proper are obviously still under the impact of the wave of popular sentiment which created them. Since it is the agencies' objective, stated by law, followed in practice, and pronounced as a major objective, to bring books within the reach of all people of their states, co-operation with representatives of all civic groups should also be cultivated in the future. The chiefs and extension workers of the state library extension agencies proper should regard these connections not only as media through which expressions of popular sentiment may be received, but also as channels which convey the agencies' concept of library service to the public at large.

Co-operation between state library extension agencies and other state agencies for library service.--Co-operation between state library extension agencies and other state agencies for library service is not well developed. In this connection a wide and rich field lies still unexplored. Duplication of effort in book purchases and in book service could be eliminated in many states if agreements could be reached with regard to book-buying policies and with regard to the scope of activities of the various agencies involved. Co-operative relationships would increase the understanding for the various kinds of library service undertaken on the state level; and, in those states in which the state library functions are assigned to several agencies, it might pave the way for the consolidation of these separate units.

Interstate co-operation.--Interstate co-operation has already been envisaged by the early framers of the state library laws. They recommended interstate co-operation in such matters as the printing of bulletins and the holding of institutes. While a considerable number of examples of joint institutes may be found,

especially in the New England region, other examples of interstate action are scarce. It is certain that more interstate co-operation will be required according to the measure in which regionalism will provide a substitute, or rather a supplement, for the governmental concepts which stop at the state limits. That chiefs of state library extension agencies are prepared to face this new trend has been shown at a recent conference³ concerned with library service in the Tennessee Valley, an area which covers parts of seven southern states. The ultimate goal of giving to everyone in the United States an equal opportunity for obtaining books can be realized only if the state library leaders join forces, and if they are willing to co-operate with the federal government should it become more active in the field of library extension.

On the whole, it seems accurate to say that the amount of state control of public libraries is relatively small, particularly as compared with the control exercised by the states over the public school system, or over public health. However, although the strongest devices of administrative supervision are infrequently found in the field of libraries, the state exercises considerable influence through advice and through the services rendered by the library agencies.

³Tennessee Valley Authority, Training Division, "Library Service in the Valley States, A Conference of Library Officers" (Knoxville, Tennessee, March 28-29, 1940). (Mimeographed.)

